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SIPDIS

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LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: PREPARING FOR REGIONAL ELECTIONS

1. (U) SUMMARY: On March 10th, 2006, Djibouti will take steps toward a new electoral structure when elections are held to create regional governing councils, part of the decentralization process of the Government of Djibouti (GoD). These elections have been postponed for more than two years but all signs indicate that this time they will take place as planned. END SUMMARY.

#### HISTORY and PROCESS

2. (U) On December 29th, 2005 President Ismael Omar Guelleh signed a decree fixing regional and local community elections for March 10th, 2006. Five of Djibouti's six districts - Arta, Ali Sabieh, Dikhil, Obock, Tadjourah - will elect regional governing councils. Three community councils will be created for Djibouti City, the sixth district and capital city. The number of seats assigned to each district is proportionate to its number of registered voters. The number of registered voters determines the number of seats in regional and community councils. One seat is given for every 1,000 registered voters in a community. Voters in each district will choose among closed party slates, with each slate including as many candidates as contested seats.

3. (U) A two-round system has been adopted for the upcoming elections. According to Article 27 of the law of decentralization, a party winning an absolute majority of votes in the first round wins all the seats in that district. If they win less than an absolute majority, the winning party only gets half of the contested seats. The remaining seats are then distributed proportionally, among competing parties that have won at least 5% of votes cast.

4. (U) Article 27 also stipulates that an independent regional election commission (CERI) be set up for each region. The Commission is responsible for the following: a) ensure that electoral lists are valid and, b) ensure that polling station staffing, voting and counting operations are well run, to protect the rights of voters and candidates.

5. (U) Six weeks before the elections, CERI members will be nominated. Candidates for the regional councils are required to submit their names no later than February 4th.

#### VIEW OF THE OPPOSITION COALITION

6. (U) The opposition coalition, made up of three different parties, boycotted the 2005 presidential election in the hope of invalidating Guelleh's reelection. They have decided to boycott the upcoming local elections as well. Lacking resources, political experience and meaningful dialogue with the governing coalition, the opposition parties have grown more and more cynical. Not only have they decried the unilateral actions of the government, they have also expressed unwillingness to negotiate with the government coalition. During Post's discussions with the leaders of opposition parties, interest was voiced in meeting with the governing coalition to discuss how to move forward. However, these leaders expressed concern that such a meeting might simply be used as a media event to gloss over substantive differences.

#### COMMENT

7. (U) During talks with the political parties, Post discerned that both coalitions were non-communicative, and found no common grounds for their grievances. Had there been a sustained willingness to talk, an opportunity may have

existed to create minimum conditions for an engaged opposition and to set the stage for competitive elections. This introduction of a mixed electoral system is no doubt a progressive political development in Djibouti. It is carefully designed to limit the negative effects of a purely majoritarian system. If successful, it could help install competitive elections permanently in Djibouti, enhance the legitimacy of elected institutions, and build public confidence in democratic processes. END COMMENT.

RAGSDALE